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SUBJECT: FRENCH REEPHASIZE THE PRIORITY FOR A "CONSENSUS"
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE IN LEBANON

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Classified By: Political Miniser Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reason
s 1.4. (B), (D).

11. (C) Summary: Nabih Berri's recent initiatives to resolve Lebanon's political crisis has caused the GOF to reemphasize its position that the next president of Lebanon needs to be a consensus figure. Meetings at the Presidency and the MFA confirmed that the GOF believes "extremists" in March 14 are insisting their candidate be elected with a simple majority, a move that the GOF believes will lead to a "catastrophe." The Presidency's NEA adviser, Boris Boillon, on September 6 ran through a memo he had drafted and endorsed by President Sarkozy that backs a consensus candidate and exerts maximum pressure, via the Saudis, on March 14 to accept Berri's proposal as the best way forward. This consensus candidate, whom Boillon accepts may not be possible to find in Lebanon, has to be someone of sufficient integrity able to work with all internal and external parties (including Syria and Iran). The Elysee and the Quai sketched out a program of action aimed at using the Saudis to pressure March 14, using Kouchner's September 10-14 trip to the region (culminating in a new round of talks in Beirut) to mobilize support for this approach. A Cousseran visit to Damascus and Tehran could occur before or after Kouchner's trip to Beirut. The culmination of this activity would likely be meetings in New York around the time Berri intends to convene parliament for the election, possibly to include a coordinated and stiff message to the Syrians. Despite what the French see as a clear divergence of analysis and approach from us, our interlocutors continue to affirm their determination to maintain what they continue to call an essential U.S./French partnership on Lebanon. End summary

12. (C) Polmincouns and poloff met September 6 with French Presidency adviser on NEA issues Boris Boillon to discuss a range of issues (reported septel notal) but which focused primarily on Lebanon. We raised Lebanon against the background of the French MFA's public statement September 3 welcoming Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Berri's offer to abandon the March 8 precondition of the formation of a new national unity government as long as all Lebanese political forces reached agreement on a presidential candidate. The MFA statement called Berri's initiative a step in the right direction that, pending further clarification, seemed congruent with efforts FM Kouchner has undertaken to facilitate an intra-Lebanese dialogue that could lead to the election of a president on time and in accordance with the

Lebanese constitution.

¶3. (c) Boillon called our inquiry timely, since he had gotten back from President Sarkozy a decision memo entitled "What to Do about Lebanon" that Sarkozy had just approved. After describing "divergent" French and U.S. analyses of the situation in Lebanon, he confirmed that France has reverted to its view that what Lebanon needs above all else is a "consensus" president able to work with and gain the trust of all internal and external parties. Boillon stated the latter would naturally include Syria and Iran. France does not accept what it sees as the USG contention that March 14 can push its candidate successfully through, including by waiting until the last ten days of Lahoud's mandate to elect whomever it wants with a simple majority. Boillon conjured up familiar doomsday scenarios of rival governments and a possible return to civil war (his memo presented three likely scenarios to Sarkozy: accord, confrontation, or civil war). He further suggested past history showed that anyone March 14 elected might be assassinated within the first ten days or so of his or her presidency.

¶4. (C) We expressed doubt whether a consensus was really possible. Boillon countered that we needed to consider and accept the "spirit" and not the "substance" of Berri's proposal. We must avoid getting dragged into constitutional discussions or debates about prospective candidates. Boillon was confident that Berri's initiative had Hizballah's full backing. Aoun was going along for tactical reasons -- because he thought March 14 would turn it down. If March 14 did agree to it, Aoun would be the loser, as he could never emerge as the consensus candidate. Boillon's main worry was that March 14 would block this initiative (he cited Walid Jumblatt as the most hardline and the biggest threat to moving ahead). Another concern Boillon shared was that letting March 14 take the lead would drag us into a

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discussion of specific candidates that no one wants. He believes the only viable candidate was someone "who must exist somewhere" with no bias, no baggage (i.e., no vendettas to settle), limited ambitions, neutral, and with no previous connection to the Serail. Sensing our stupefaction, Boillon suggested perhaps "someone from outside Lebanon."

¶5. (C) Reading selectively from his memo, Boillon saw the policy options in play as:

--Support the majority (with U.S. and Saudi backing) in a way that could polarize the situation dangerously and lead to chaos (he indicated Nassib Lahoud would be the main beneficiary of this approach);

--Continue the Kouchner-led initiative to find common ground, limit the possibility of "extremist" candidacies, and avoid discussion (by the GOF and USG) of the constitution, quorum, timing, etc.

Assuming the second option would be the one chosen, Boillon said it would be best to:

--Convince all partners of the preferability of consensus (Boillon saw Saudi Arabia as the most important -- see below for more);

--Send a message to Syria along the lines of Sarkozy's recent speech (i.e., promising that Syria's good conduct during the election would be rewarded by a renewed bilateral dialogue), with an emphasis on France's readiness to apply unilateral sanctions should the Syrians not cooperate;

--Have a "demanding" dialogue with Iran on Lebanon; and

--Continue the intra-Lebanese dialogue.

Regarding Syria, Boillon said that, given what he called

Syrian "autism," it was vital to avoid a negative or provocative message and stress positive themes such as how important it will be for the next Lebanese president to have good relations with Syria.

16. (C) Going forward, Boillon outlined the following:

--Talking to Saudi Arabia: President Sarkozy has taken up Jordanian King Abdullah's offer, made in a just-concluded brief visit to Paris, to speak to Saudi King Abdallah to ask that March 14 moderate its position and for Riyadh to support Berri's initiative.

--Supporting Berri's initiative: Kouchner will carry his message of support to the region when he visits Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Egypt, and (possibly) Lebanon September 10-14.

--Talks at UNGA: After passing through Washington, Kouchner will make Lebanon a major subject of key bilateral discussions on the margins of UNGA with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the USG that may culminate in strong messages to the Syrian and Iranian FMs. The timing, Boillon noted, would be just before the September 25 date on which Berri wants to convoke the Lebanese parliament to begin the electoral process.

17. (C) Boillon stressed throughout the GOF's desire to maintain the close partnership with the U.S. on Lebanon and determination not to lose any of the hard won gains over the past two years. However, he sees the danger of March 14 now blocking what to the GOF seems the only way forward. The risk, in France's eyes, of a very unstable and possibly violent situation is unacceptably high. He asserted that Lebanon only exists through consensus; we must retain that country's tradition of inclusiveness and make those "seeking polarization" understand the responsibility they will assume for the catastrophe that they may trigger. Boillon said both sides must understand their limits. In this vein, France believes the opposition cannot continue to challenge the government indefinitely just as it believes "extremists" within the majority should not be allowed to push past the limits of what the Lebanese system can handle. Lebanon needs a "peace of the brave" in which everyone seeks a minimum basis for accord. It also needs a new president backed by a

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sufficient majority to build up strong momentum to consolidate the gains the country has made. As he doubled back to hit the consensus theme again, Boillon paradoxically and rhetorically asked whether Michel Aoun could be part of a new government. "Why not?" was his answer.

18. (C) In a meeting later the same day with DAS-equivalent Ludovic Pouille, who did not evince awareness of the earlier conversation with Boillon, he confirmed that, since French special envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran's meetings in Washington last week, France was reemphasizing its preference for seeking a consensus candidate to being prepared to support March 14 no matter what. This was entirely due to Berri's unexpected "initiative," which the MFA praised publicly and for which Kouchner sent a personal note of appreciation to Berri.

19. (C) Pouille added the following to what Boillon outlined above:

--Kouchner is expected to arrive in Beirut September 13 for consultations overnight and the following day during his upcoming regional swing;

--Cousseran's next stops after his current visit to Rome are still being worked out (probably Saudi Arabia and Egypt), with Syria and Iran not ruled out (Pouille suggested there was strenuous argument as to whether it made more sense for Cousseran to visit Damascus after Kouchner visits Beirut but

before everyone gathers again in New York);

--Kouchner will not go to Damascus (Pouille was a bit offended that we posed the question); and

--The plan is for culminating talks in New York in the days leading up to the first parliamentary session on the 25th as noted above, although this was quite fluid.

¶10. (C) Pouille added that Kouchner had spoken to visiting Saudi FM Sa'ud al-Faisal about the Berri initiative and asked him to encourage March 14 support. Sa'ud reportedly agreed with Kouchner and said he would do what he could. Pouille also confirmed that Cousseran had visited Saad Hariri in Monaco before heading to Rome. When asked whether Cousseran delivered a message of "moderation" to Saad, Pouille responded: "Only the Minister delivers messages; Cousseran just listens."

¶11. (C) Comment: Berri's recent announcements have helped those within the GOF who continue to argue for seeking a consensus candidate over subtle but unequivocal backing to March 14. Kouchner's initiative, which had effectively run out of steam, has gotten a second wind and renewed backing from President Sarkozy by playing on concerns that supporting March 14 now could lead to potentially catastrophic risks. We cannot evaluate Berri's motivations or intentions from this vantage point, but the French clearly believe he remains the key to any solution. End comment

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